Toronto International Film Festival 2004-Part 1

A certain polarization

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This is the first of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival.

The Toronto film festival is a large event, perhaps the second most important of its kind in the world today. At its 29th edition, held September 9-18, some 328 films (253 of them fiction or non-fiction features) from 60 countries were screened. Hundreds of thousands of spectators, hundreds of journalists and hundreds more industry representatives viewed the various works. The US film studios brought their products and a few of their stars; foreign commercial industries did as well. A number of artistic and socially critical films, some without distributors or much financial backing, also made their presence felt.

The figure of 60 countries is of course deceptive. Inevitably, given the present global economic realities, the vast majority of the films came from the US, Canada, France, Britain, Germany and a handful of large industrial nations. Voices from the poorest regions and the poorest populations can barely be heard, if they are heard at all.

Over the course of 10 days or so, the critic or dedicated spectator confronts an almost overwhelming stream of images. The more engaging the films, the more complex the process of assimilating and making sense of them, of trying to draw out more general tendencies. Little more than a week goes by, but if the works are serious ones, if each contains its own "passage of time" (whether a day, a year or a lifetime), corresponding to the length of the human and dramatic situation, the viewer feels he has been at the effort far longer, for some indefinite and slightly unreal but heightened period of time that resists easy definition.

These engaging works have to be tracked down with some diligence. They are relatively (and disgracefully) few in number. The notion that the development of art is determined, in the final analysis, by the development of the world and that the serious art of any given epoch has as its content what is most important to the people of that epoch, is certainly put to the test by the film industry as presently constituted. Or, rather, the fact that the vast majority of films so feebly reflect present-day existence speaks to their general unseriousness as art.

Over the past several years, the world has grown more tense and dangerous. Powerful economic and social contradictions built up over decades have burst to the surface. The launching of a criminal war in Iraq with all its destabilizing consequences and the threat of new and bloodier wars to come are central facts of life. They cannot be ignored—or if they are, there is a considerable moral and artistic price to pay. Filmmakers, whatever their attitudes to the war, cannot help but be aware of the new reality. It presses on the brain and heart. We have entered an era of rapid and brutal changes, not only in world events, but also in popular consciousness.

Very little of this explosiveness has found expression, directly or indirectly, in contemporary filmmaking. Very little understanding of the social process in general is reflected in cinema today. New techniques, particularly in digital video, increase cinema's flexibility and accessibility. Abbas Kiarostami, the Iranian filmmaker, suggests that this means returning filmmaking to the poet, the artist. Aside from ignoring the not insignificant matter of distribution, Kiarostami proposes an *organizational* solution to what is fundamentally an *intellectual and aesthetic* problem. The dominance of big money has not been the only, or even the principal, stumbling block in recent filmmaking (as Kiarostami's recent films demonstrate).

The "independent" cinema does not have much to show for itself in recent years. Thousands of smaller, low-budget films have reached the public, in North America and elsewhere, that are all too often tedious and empty samplings of what the average graduate of film school thinks: more or less, not very much at all. One might go so far as to suggest that the American studios have had a far easier time of grabbing the lion's share of the international film market in the past decade because they have filled a vacuum created in part by the bankruptcy of most "art" and "independent" cinema.

Masses of people continue to turn out at the cinema, in search of amusement and excitement, but how often are they pleased by what they see? No one cares to inquire, least of all the major studios and their media hangers-on. But the numbers suggest a lack of enthusiasm, if not conscious dissatisfaction. US box office revenue slipped slightly in 2003, to $9.28 billion, still a nearly record figure. However, much of the recent increase in revenue has resulted from higher ticket prices, which have risen by nearly 25 percent in the US since 1999. The average number of people attending the cinema in the US has fallen in three of the last five years, with last year's attendance up only 4 percent from 1999 levels.

Meanwhile the expense of producing and marketing films has continued to climb. Some two-dozen bloated studio productions cost more than $100 million in 2003, and budgets for two of those reached $200 million. In the face of that, the president of a box office tracking firm bluntly told *CNN/Money*, "I think you could say that audiences [in 2003] were mostly underwhelmed by what they saw in theaters. With a record number of sequels and mixed results for most, there was no mandate by audiences in favor of the re-treads."

Contemporary film and video technology is capable of generating the most extraordinary pictures; virtually any image of past, present or imagined life is now within the realm of possibility. And yet mainstream cinema has never exhibited such intellectual poverty, such narrowness. With massive resources at its disposal, the film industry can only work over the same clichéd and worn-out themes, settings and relationships in a series of unimaginative permutations.

To borrow a phrase from Trotsky, filmmaking largely "languishes in the contradiction between the modernism of form and the archaic, indifferent content." The solution to this languishing will not come entirely from within filmmaking. A new social mood, the movement of masses of people in opposition to the status quo, changes "in the organic fabric of contemporary society" are necessary.

However, the artist is not fatalistically at the mercy of these processes. Above all, he mustn't sit around with his arms crossed until things

dramatically change around him. What's needed, in the first place, is the development of objective knowledge about the laws and relationships governing the society in which the filmmakers live and work, and beyond that, a genuine passion for life and the world. Nothing can be accomplished on the basis of the miserable grasp of things that is presently accounted knowledge and experience in film circles. The "creative" people there generally know next to nothing of importance. They have merely mastered the art of passing from one relatively meaningless but lucrative "project" to another.

To accept the world, "unconditionally, in all its incontrovertible reality," is not to accept *all that exists*. On the contrary, such an acceptance is the only basis for genuine protest and outrage. Elevating oneself "above" the world, through semi-mysticism, or evading it, through semi-pornography, or shutting it out, through self-absorption, are all means, in the end, of "reconciling oneself with what exists, in all its real ugliness." (Trotsky)

We live in complex times. In the face of difficult and often painful reality, artists make choices, consciously or otherwise, shaped by their social-artistic backgrounds and predispositions. Many bury their heads in the sand, or in trivia. Others "defiantly" wear their indifference to social life as a badge of honor. Still others, overwhelmed by events, are reduced to hysteria and sensationalism. And a few, a small minority at this moment, observe, think and create in a rich and deeply felt manner.

One senses a certain polarization. At one end of the spectrum, a growth in sensitivity and concreteness; at the other, an even greater level of self-involvement and a studied lack of interest in the fate of wide layers of the population.

Several films clustered around the events of September 11, the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the conditions in those latter counties stood out: *Land of Plenty* (Wim Wenders, Germany), *Turtles Can Fly* (Bahman Ghobadi, Iran), *Stray Dogs* (Marziyeh Meshkini, Iran) and *Gunner Palace* (Michael Tucker, US), in particular. *Earth and Ashes* (Atiq Rahini) provides further insight into the catastrophic consequences for the Afghan people of the decades of Great Power intervention.

The World (Jia Zhang-ke) is a serious effort to treat the consequences of China's ongoing "modernization." In Volker Schlöndorff's *The Ninth Day*, based on an episode from the Second World War, a Catholic priest is given a nine-day "leave" from hell, imprisonment at Dachau, as part of an effort to make the Church in Luxemburg more amenable to German occupation.

Omagh (Pete Travis) carefully recounts the story of a family whose only son is killed in a 1998 terrorist bombing in Northern Ireland. Moreover, with devastating implications for the September 11 attacks, the film alleges that the authorities had been alerted and, in fact, allowed the bombing to take place.

Pjer Zalica (Bosnia and Herzegovina) has followed up his valuable and humane *Fuse* with *Days and Hours*, a modest film about post-war reconciliation that also deals with the impact of a dead son. *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* (Niels Mueller) is probably not a success in the end, but its ambition is commendable. Inspired by a real incident, a would-be hijacking of an airplane and assassination attempt in 1974, the film details the moral disintegration of an "Everyman" furniture salesman (Sean Penn) as each of his dreams comes to grief.

Plastic Flowers (Liu Bingjian) examines the fake values imposed on ordinary people in China and their tragic consequences. *Private* (Saverio Costanzo, Italy) is an intelligent look at one small corner of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Pawel Pawlikowski's *My Summer of Love* (UK), with its slight echo of Fassbinder's *Fox and his Friends*, is a pointed look at love and social class, with a sidelong glance at Christian fundamentalism. Michael Radford's new version of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, with Al Pacino, is relatively sensitive and convincing.

Perhaps none of these films, about some of which we will have more to say, is a great work of art, but each is an honest effort in a difficult cultural and ideological environment.

On the other side of the coin, the retreat from reality takes various and ever more desperate forms. Egotism and extreme subjectivism dominate certain layers of the artistic community. The world terrifies and overwhelms a good number of people in these circles. Confused, demoralized by the events of the past several decades and lacking any interest in clarifying matters, they do everything in their power to distract themselves and their audiences from the pressing issues of modern life. "I understand nothing, and, if I can help it, neither will you!" seems to be the watchword.

One of the manifestations of this process was the proliferation of hard-core sex films at the festival. Stupid, cold and self-important films, made by directors trying to make a name for themselves with "cutting-edge" material that represents no threat whatsoever to the powers that be. One can be "infamous" and "outrageous" in this manner, in other words, and not threaten one's bank balance.

Leading the way was the inimitable Catherine Breillat (*Romance*) from France. Her *Anatomy of Hell* (*Anatomie de l'enfer*), based on her own novel, *Pornocratie*, recounts the story of a man paid by a woman to tell her why he (and all men, by implication) fear and despise the female body, and have since time immemorial. Of course he murders her at the conclusion of the encounters. How else could it end? Breillat piously instructed her audience at the film's world premiere to "observe the film in silence." We have no way of knowing whether the spectators took her at her word, but, pretentious, self-pitying and narcissistic at one stroke, *Anatomy of Hell* deserves only howls of derisive laughter.

Michael Winterbottom's *9 Songs* is less pretentious (and mean-spirited), but equally empty-headed in its own right. The story of a love affair, with extended and explicit sexual scenes, *9 Songs* is guaranteed notoriety. The director explains, "I like making films as real as possible.... If you film actors eating a meal, the food is real; the audience know that. But when it comes to sex they know it's pretend. You'd never do that with food and so I started thinking we should make sex real."

What can one say in the face of this persuasive argument? Why not a police thriller with real bullets? Winterbottom's film tells us nothing about its characters except that they have certain biological capacities and responses. We suspected as much before we entered the theater. A waste of time and money.

Lukas Moodysson (*Lilya 4-ever*), the over-praised Swedish director, has made a film set in the world of amateur pornography, *A Hole in My Heart*. Moodysson is one of the cinema's hysterics. Scandinavia has more than its share (and the film industry in particular), now that the social democratic model, the supposed "third way" between "communism" and capitalism, has collapsed.

Moodysson says of his newest film, "I want people to feel bad. People who feel great in this world are psychopaths. Most of us are. We have been forced to become psychopaths, or else we would not survive on a planet where more human beings die every day because of starvation than all of the human beings who died in the World Trade Center." This misanthropic path leads nowhere.

Filmmaking needs to turn toward the world in all the fullness of its reality.